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Some problems with ‘research’ in UK Fine Art institutions

Daniel Jewesbury

The arguments in this paper are, from the point of view of academic research, unsoundly reasoned and quite unsubstantiated. The paper’s polemical tone perhaps generates more heat than light. It is not intended to be a closely-argued presentation of empirical data or a contribution to critical theory. I present it simply because I feel that it verbalises many things said to me by colleagues and friends about the conditions in which they work, which perhaps, bound as they are to institutions, they are unable to say themselves, and that many reading it will recognise at least some of the aspects that I’ve summarised.

‘Research’ for the purpose of the RAE is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, and to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. It excludes routine testing and routine analysis of materials, components and processes such as for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.

UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) definition of research

This definition (like the AHRC’s) is so generalized as to exclude very little and to offer very little in meaningfully describing how art activity – as research – might relate to other humanities research, nor why it might be approachable in exactly the same way, or definable in precisely the same terms. There are supplementary guidelines for practice-based and applied research but they all relate centrally to this overarching definition.

This short paper grew out of some remarks that I made at a conference in Ballymun, Dublin, in early 2008, where the subject of debate was the questionable relevance of the ‘public/private’ dichotomy in discussions about art and autonomy. I wanted to suggest at that point that beyond local authority commissioning of public art, and the commodification of art through commercial galleries, there was, in the UK at least, a third level (appropriately enough) of instrumentalisation of art, which was the instrumentalisation through the research agendas of the UK university system. At Ballymun I made those remarks very much a footnote to the discussion but was invited, in the context of *The State of Play*, to expand on my argument a little. These remarks were also delivered to an Irish audience, many of whom

were unfamiliar with the conditions of the UK research system, hence the explanatory nature of some remarks, which will perhaps seem rather too elementary to British readers.

In the mid-1990s, a host of conference events were held around the UK to try and address the question of what 'fine art research' might actually be – what it might look like, how you might approach or understand or appreciate or evaluate it. I went to a number of these events as a PhD student from 1997 on, and many of them seemed to consist of presentations of work by individuals wanting to justify their art as somehow based in research.

Of course, all art practice has to be based in initial processes of research, working out how not to do something and arriving at a satisfying formal resolution of technical, conceptual and methodological concerns. But at this period in the UK the need was clearly felt to define more *rationaly* how research informed and was integral to art practice. The majority of art colleges had just been subsumed into the university system and, rather than continuing to fund themselves as they had previously done, had to fall into line with the research funding of universities as a whole. So you had, and still have, a system of evaluating research periodically and allocating future funds accordingly through research councils. For staff to progress within their institutions, they had to be seen to be research active, to be attracting or generating funding, which their institutions could top-slice, and which would then allow them to devote more time to research, producing a virtuous circle in which everyone benefits, down to the most junior members of non-research active staff, whose future could be guaranteed a little longer by the need for them to pick up the extra teaching.

I contend that what's developed in the context of UK Fine Art university departments in the last fifteen years with regards to a 'research agenda' has been thoroughly counterproductive. Artists whose teaching skills and dedication were never in doubt have been forced to find new ways of justifying their practice, and defining it, somehow – anyhow – as research. Such is the pressure on all academics to fund their own jobs that those members of staff who can't attract research funding feel themselves to be locked out of career advancement and to believe that their positions are at best tenuous.

So good, established artists have to learn a new language for defining their work that is not at all about the work itself, but entirely about the processes and decisions leading to it, and their ability to evaluate and discriminate in making those decisions. The problem here is that such an evaluative approach can only measure the *efficacy* of a research process and can't ascertain whether that process has produced good, bad or stolidly mediocre art. And, of course, we have the corollary of the artist pressured into a research agenda, which is the academic trying to pass off research – maybe very thorough, rigorous research – *as art*. Subjective aesthetic judgements become rationalized as objective. Dull, process-led art, illustrative in the worst way of concepts and arguments, is promoted by university-linked galleries and in an internally-circulated round of theoretical publications, entirely at a parallel to any kind of art 'mainstream', however we might define that.

The latest development in the institutions has been the sudden mushrooming of PhD programmes in Fine Art. Within Northern Ireland (which is the academic context that I know), the government have allocated large amounts of funding to doctoral programmes generally because they want to grow research that can be applied or instrumentalized within a supposedly post-conflict political context. But all across the UK, PhD funding is now extremely high.

Candidates' suitability, and their understanding of their fields of research are increasingly highly questionable. Once again the old university demand for 'high-value' students dictates that numbers must grow every year, regardless of whether sufficient resources are in place for the new cohorts. Several friends confirm to me that they are currently registered for PhD programmes primarily because of the large grants available (at a time when undergraduates find it increasingly hard to fund their studies). The majority of Fine Art PhD students I know receive more in grants than the half-time staff supervising them are paid. And increasing student numbers mean extra demands on staff who are pressured into supervising when, theoretically, they're sometimes only one chapter ahead themselves.

Many students completing Fine Art PhDs are equipped neither to be academics nor artists (I make this comment because it's not such a long time since the PhD was presumed to be a qualification one took because one wanted to have a career as an academic). If a Fine Art department takes in thirty doctoral students a year (as some do), there are clearly not going to be enough academic posts for them to fill at the end of their research. And their lack of engagement with the mainstream of art during the compressed period of their research means that they often have no experience in dealing with galleries or curators, developing a professional practice, or even making work at all independently of academic supports. The fact that a growing number of such students are entering their courses straight from MAs or BAs means that they have *never had* an independent practice; the methodological approaches learned in their theoretical studies, developed without reference to the structures of professional art, produce graduates who are simply incapable of making careers as artists. One former BA student of mine, having immediately undertaken an MA at the same institution, was affronted and indignant when I suggested that she might benefit from a year or two as a professional artist before embarking on a PhD. It seems that, rather than the studio-based, professionally-g geared MA, the PhD is now the necessary terminal degree.

These situations needn't be quite so. Practice-based research within the academy does not have to be entirely divorced from the research-based practices that are increasingly common in Europe today. Staff who feel themselves unqualified or insufficiently prepared to supervise PhD students (whose suitability they may anyway question) need not be forced to 'adapt or die'. Fine Art research funding structures need not adopt so slavishly the dictates of Humanities research. Art colleges do not have to copy the labour casualization and funding-led research agendas of the universities of which they are now part. But academics in the UK system generally seem to feel so overworked, so cowed, and so distanced from the policy decisions that shape their work that they continue to accept these conditions as inevitable. I would hope that this need not be the case as Ireland considers what practices it should adopt in the implementation of programmes of Fine Art research.